AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

Aboriginal service during the First World War

When it was colonised by Europeans, Austr
no formally binding treaties made with Indig
recognition of the rights of the Indigenous in

The Defence Act of 1903 stated that all male
training; as Aboriginal Australians were not c
from military service. (It was not until 1949 t
Indigenous Australians to join the Australian

At the outbreak of the war large numbers of
Aboriginal Australians also answered the cal
1,000 Indigenous Australians – out of an est
fought in the First World War (though the re
known what motivated Indigenous Australia
(AIF), but loyalty and patriotism doubtless p
of a receiving a wage. Indigenous soldiers w
soldiers. In general, indigenous soldiers serv
other members of the AIF, with many experi
first time in their lives. There may have also
deliver greater equality after the war. In real
life they were treated with the same prejudi

Only rarely did the Australian army note on
was 'Aboriginal'; often just a description, specifying dark complexion, dark hair, or brown eyes, was entered. However, note was made of a soldier's Aboriginality, in the event of his being discharged as unfit for service because of it.

By the end of 1915 it became harder for Aboriginal Australians to enlist, and some were rejected because of their race. But this did not deter others, and some travelled hundreds of kilometres to enlist after being turned down at centres closer to their

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communities. Some who had been passed by the recruiter were then rejected while under training in the camps.

Instructions for the "guidance of enlisting officers at approved military recruiting depots" issued in 1916 state that "Aboriginals, half-casts, or men with Asiatic blood are not to be enlisted – This applies to all coloured men." However, some Indigenous Australians who were of lighter skin colour with mixed European parentage enlisted by claiming foreign nationality. It was usually left up to the recruiting officer to decide whether to allow the person to enlist, so people with darker-skin did sometimes slip through.

By October 1917, when recruits were harder
had already been lost, restrictions were cau
"Half-castes may be enlisted in the Australia
examining Medical Officers are satisfied that

Private Richard Martin

Richard Martin joined the AIF on 17 Decemb
papers that he was born in Dunedin, New Z
prior service in the Australian Light Horse. R
Island in Queensland. He was taken on the s
on Gallipoli.

Martin was transferred to the 47th Battalion
serve in France, where he was wounded in a
wounded in action on 7 June 1917 in Belgium
gunshot wound to the right hand. He rejoine
was killed in action a month later. Some rec
cemetery at Dernancourt, but a later docum

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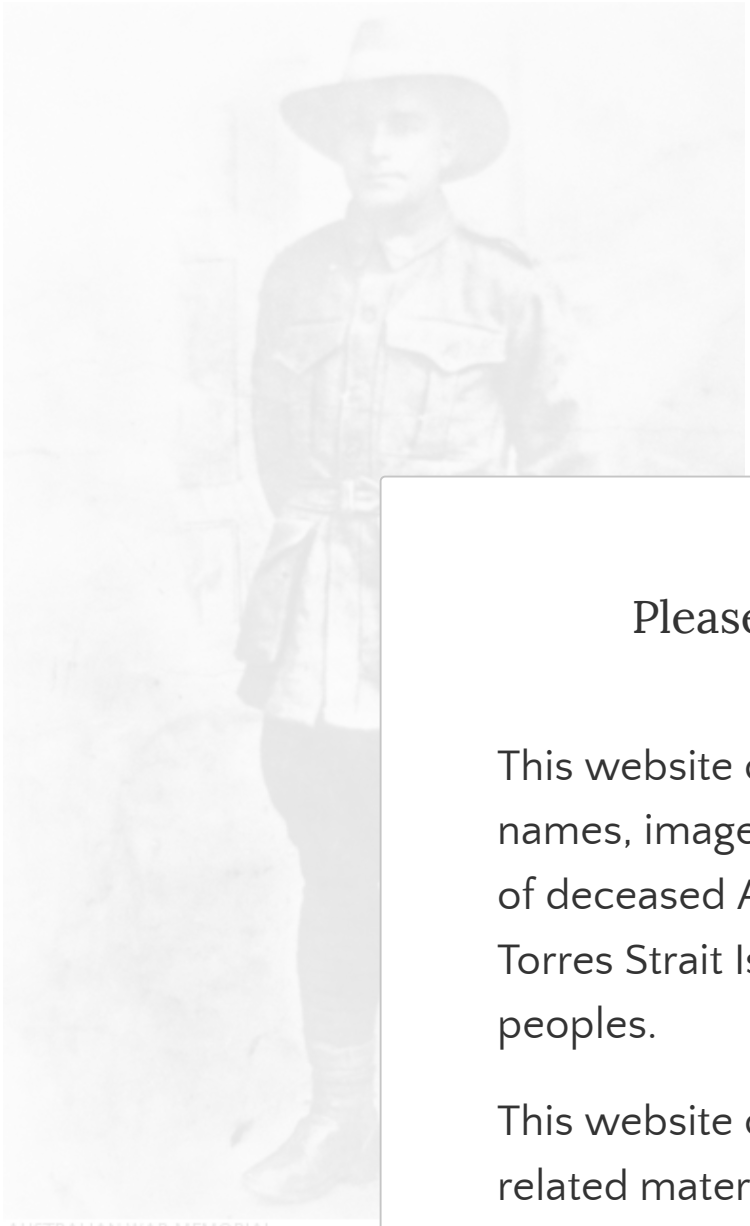

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Private Richard Martin

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Private Edmund Bilney

Edmund Bilney joined the AIF in June 1917 (before the easing of restrictions in late 1917); a note on his attestation papers describes him as a half-cast. Bilney was attached to B Company, Mitcham AIF Camp, South Australia, for training but was discharged after serving just 16 days, the medical board having described him thus: "deficient physique, half cast Aboriginal, too full blood for the AIF".

Corporal Harry Thorpe MM

Harry Thorpe was born at the Lake Tyers Mission Station, near Lakes Entrance, Victoria. He enlisted at Sale on 12 February 1916, and embarked from Melbourne on 4 April 1916 aboard HMAT Euripides. He joined the 7th Battalion in France in July 1916. He was wounded in action at Pozières in 1916 and Bullecourt in 1917.

Lance Corporal Thorpe was awarded the Military Medal and promoted to corporal for his conspicuous courage and leadership he showed during operations at Broodseinde, near Ypres, in Belgium, on the night of 4–5 October 1917. During the advance on 9 August 1918 at Lihons Wood, south-west of
found Thorpe shot in the stomach. He died s
Heath Cemetery, Harbonnières, France, with
Aboriginal Military Medal winner who was k

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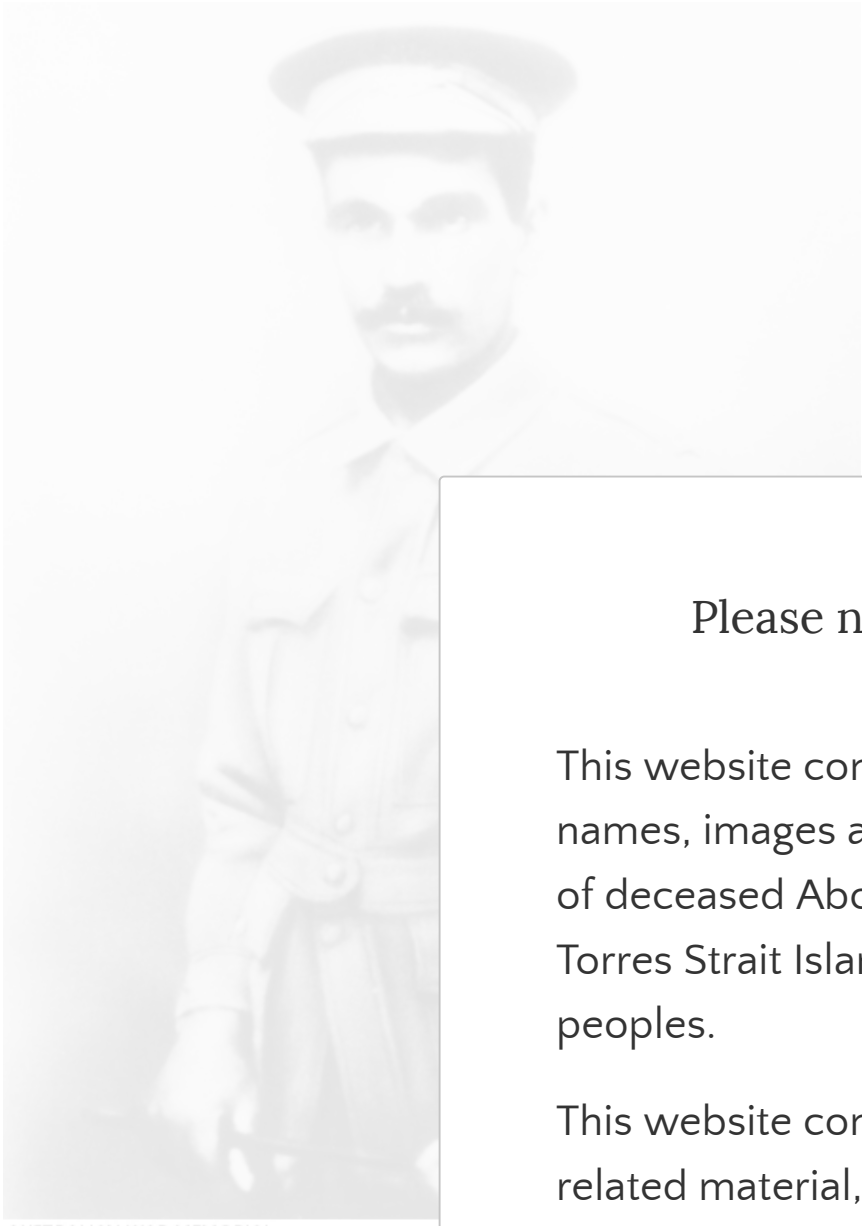

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Corporal Harry Thorpe MM

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Douglas Grant

Douglas Grant was born into a traditional Aboriginal community in the Bullenden Kerr Ranges of Northern Queensland in the early 1880s. His early family life was torn apart in 1887 when his parents and much of his Aboriginal community were killed in what was believed to be a tribal fight. He was rescued just moments from death by scientist Robert Grant, a Scottish immigrant surveying in the area at the time. Naming him Douglas, he raised him as his son.

The Grant family settled in Lithgow, New South Wales. Douglas, along with Robert's other son, Henry, attended Scots College in Sydney. There, he developed a love for Shakespeare and poetry, and his talent for drawing was encouraged. After finishing school, Douglas pursued his interest in drawing, training as a mechanical draughtsman.

When the First World War broke out Grant managed to enlist with the 34th Battalion in January 1916. However, as he was about to leave Australia the Aborigines Protection Board intervened, noting that regulations prevented Aboriginals from leaving the country without government approval. Undeterred, Grant enlisted again, and this time successfully embarked with the 13th Battalion in August.

However, his service was to be short-lived.
arriving in France, Grant was captured durin
at least 3,300 men were killed or wounded

Grant was a well-educated, articulate man
was a person of curiosity to German doctor
comrades, however, he was cherished as a
honest and quick-witted.

After his capture, Grant spent two months i
complexion, he ended up at Wünsdorf (Zos
state of Brandenburg. Wünsdorf was a Halb
type of "show camp" where the Germans ke
many of whom were Muslims, hoping to ex
their colonial masters. While there, Grant su
Indian prisoners as a member of the British

After 22 months, Grant was repatriated to A
draughtsman before moving on to work as a
small-arms factory. He lobbied for Aborigin
servicemen's affairs. Grant died in 1951, age
Sydney.

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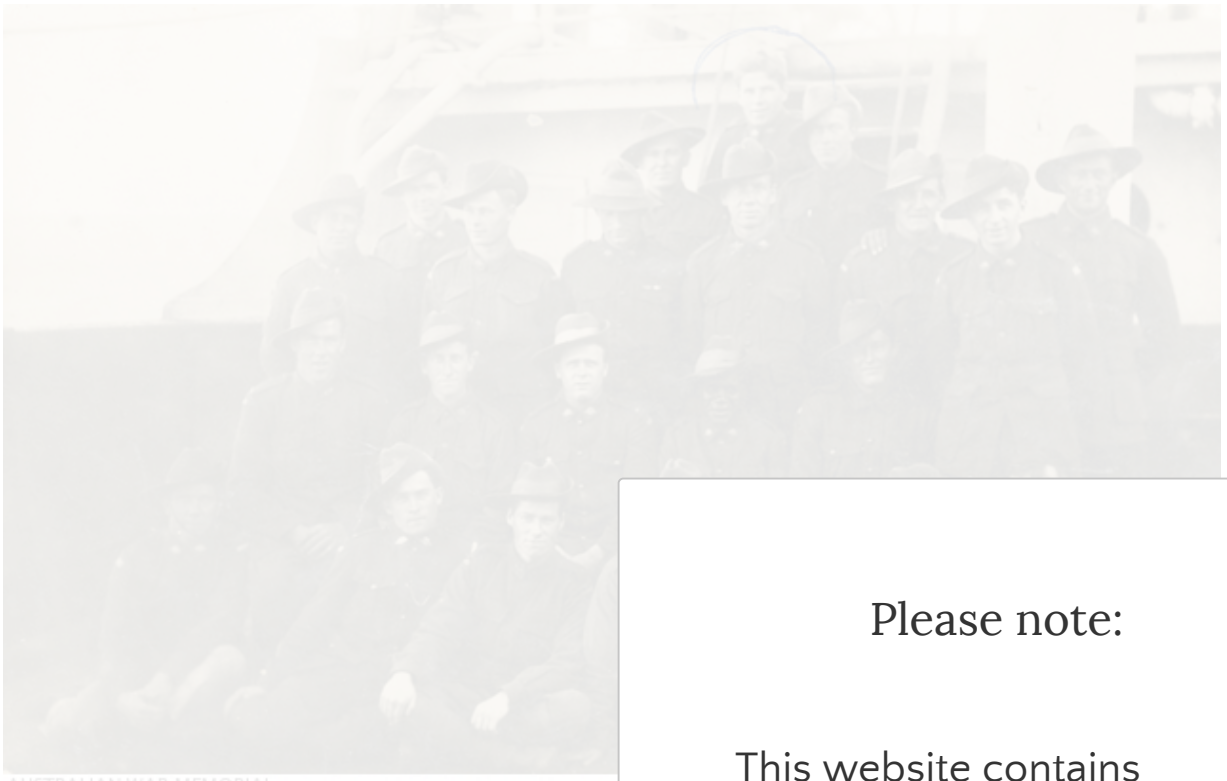

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6020 Pte Douglas Grant (second row, sea
Australia with other soldiers on HMAT Me

Last updated: 20 December 2019

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